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ABSTRACT

The problem of teaching culture in language classes is reflected in the criticism directed to the current Part 4 section of the Regents foreign language examination given in the State of New York. This paper, the result of a panel discussion on culture, proposes changes in the examinations and proposes new directions in the study of culture. Topics include: (1) the nature of culture, (2) purposes of teaching culture, (3) cultural and educational goals, (4) testing, (5) implementation of theories, (6) teaching methodology, and (7) official position of the New York State Bureau of Foreign Languages Education on the issue of language and culture teaching. (RL)

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To: Teachers of Modern Foreign Languages, Guidance Counselors, and Administrators

Subject: Foreign Language Instruction in New York State for the 1970's: "The Culture Question"

During late 1969 and early 1970, the Bureau of Foreign Languages Education conducted a series of panels designed to furnish advice on the directions which foreign language instruction in New York State should take in the 1970's. Successive panels discussed separate though related topics which had been identified by teachers, administrators, and Department personnel as of outstanding significance. Reports on the deliberations of the panels will be published in separate papers, of which this is the first.

As research in anthropology, linguistics, and allied disciplines has developed, alert and knowledgeable persons have become increasingly dissatisfied with the nature of the questions which purport to test the pupils' understanding of foreign cultures in the current Part 4 of the Regents examinations in modern foreign languages. However, to say that the nature of the questions is unsatisfactory is really to say that the nature of the instruction and learning on which the testing is based is first and foremost unsatisfactory. This criticism is less a reflection on New York State foreign language teachers than on the Department and the profession as a whole.

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To investigate the possibilities of improving this part of the examinations, and thus of improving the teaching and learning of "culture," the Bureau of Foreign Languages Education selected an Advisory Panel to discuss the issue at the State Education Building on October 31, 1969. Panelists were Professors Michel Beaujour of New York University, H. Ned Seelye of the Illinois Office of Public Instruction, and Rebecca Valette of Boston College. Department personnel from the Bureaus of Foreign Languages Education, Elementary and Secondary Educational Testing, and Secondary Curriculum Development also participated in the discussions. Paul M. Glaude, Chief of the Bureau of Foreign Languages Education, was panel chairman.

The panelists prepared beforehand papers which formed a basis for the discussions. As expected, the actual discussions produced some divergence from original points of view. Although later summarized, the views and recommendations of the Advisory Panel are first presented below in groups under special headings in an attempt to preserve some of the flavor of the discussions and to stress both relatively unfamiliar notions and once-familiar notions that have become "lost" over the last decade or more.

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The Nature of Culture

Culture is to be treated as a humanistic discipline, a "science of man" which seeks to understand and analyze a set of social realities.

Culture is a structured discourse; in the culture of a country, every item means something only in relation to all other items, and no item means something by itself. There is no way of understanding discrete items as representative of another culture; one must organize the discrete items into systems whose totality describes the given culture.

There is a total cultural pattern, a specific structure within which items function. The overall patterns remain and provide the structure. Cultural meanings are found in the relationships of items, not in the meanings of isolated items.

As teachers and students of language, we are very alert to signs. In dealing with culture, we can be greatly aided by modern science. Semiotics is the science of signs and can be used to decode social messages, to grasp the cultural signs embedded in ordinary language. By organizing these signs into systems, we can describe a given culture.

Cultural anthropologists have clearly shown that in a given culture people will react within certain ranges and not within other ranges, though stresses may occur. In a given culture, there is a certain structure which will make it so that other behaviors than the expected one will be deviant to some extent.

Language is a cultural tool. It oils the machinery of culture and keeps things going.

Purposes

The purpose of teaching about culture is to teach how culture works, to emphasize how discrete items function and interact.

The purpose of studying a foreign culture is to stimulate intellectual inquiry and awareness rather than to create emotional or intellectual accord.

We reject the goal of trying to train the pupils to function in a foreign culture somewhat as natives, and we replace it with that of training Americans to understand how the natives function in their own culture.

The study of a foreign culture is just a means to an end, and that end is not to acculturate people to a foreign culture but to acculturate people to a certain type of intellectual ability to function within modern culture. It is not possible for an American to function in a foreign culture like a native member of that culture. But it is useful for an American to understand some workings of the foreign culture, to understand what things mean in the foreign society. To that extent, one can function intellectually, but not for the purpose of imitation or identification. What we want is some kind of setting up of relationships. This is properly the function of intelligence. Culture provides us with concrete items, but what we are interested in, is not the concrete items in themselves. We are interested in establishing systems of relationships in the mind. We are not interested in separate items.

Cultural Goals and Educational Goals

Just as the teaching of culture should not have the goal of training the pupil to function in the foreign culture, so should the cultural aspects of the Regents examinations in the Modern Foreign Languages not have the goal of finding out how well the pupil can function in the foreign culture.

Rather, the goal of both is concerned with pupil comprehension of how the native speaker of the foreign language functions in his own culture. Teaching the pupil, through classroom foreign language study, to function as a native in the foreign culture is an impossible -- even an undesirable -- goal. Cultural training should be in tune with the intellectual objectives of the New York State Education Department. The object should be to train certain types of minds to give a certain type of intellectual training, divorced as much as possible from ideology and indoctrination. What we want to work into cultural study is an intellectual grasp of problems. By extension, the Regents examinations in the different modern foreign languages should be concerned with culture as it relates to an intellectual grasp of problems.

We wish to develop and test, not the degree of the pupil's acceptance of the foreign culture or his ability to function in it, but his ability to recognize, identify, and even predict appropriate reactions of members of the culture in given social situations. This may involve consideration of stereotypes, but it goes far beyond that in understanding social and other reasons for typical behavior of members of a foreign culture. For example, social stratification is a fact of all known societies. The teacher should tell the pupils some of the signs (linguistic, behavioral, and other) of the cultural reality in this important area.

It is disturbing that modern techniques for learning foreign languages are increasingly unrelated to the intellectual activities found in other disciplines. Foreign language study has the duty of contributing to the intellectual maturation of its students, adherents, and practitioners. We shall achieve a goal central to the purposes of education if we can arouse the intellectual interest of our pupils in the culture corresponding to the foreign language which they are studying.

There is a striking difference between the level of intellectual and emotional performance expected in other disciplines and that expected in this aspect of foreign language learning--a shocking discrepancy which is a form of infantilization. The only solution to the problem is a more scientific approach; namely, the study of culture as a system or a system of systems, in each of the languages.

There is an obvious problem involved in avoiding infantilization while attempting to impart relatively sophisticated insights into a foreign culture to American adolescents who have an imperfect control of the foreign language. We insist that the degree of sophistication of the cultural notions acquired in foreign language study should match that required in the notions or intellectual concepts characteristic of other areas of the curriculum, such as the sciences. If language is an insuperable obstacle, there is no point in making believe that we are teaching culture, which must be taught -- if at all -- on a level of sophistication comparable to that desired in other curricular areas. However, we believe that the language barrier can be overcome.

It is true that 3 academic years of study in grades 9-12 may seem too short for the realization of ambitious goals, but we must adopt as our goals only what is genuinely achievable by serious pupils working under capable teachers in an educational system which understands its duties and fosters the intellectual development of its pupils.

Towards the Development of a "Culture" Test

There are no satisfactory culture tests anywhere in existence today.

The three consultants forming this Advisory Panel cannot devise the whole cultural test for the Regents examinations in all the modern foreign languages. There has to be more research and scholarship before arriving

at valid items. However, enough is known and can be devised to make a respectable start which will certainly be an improvement over what is currently being used.

The present cultural question of the Regents examinations confirms teachers in their belief that culture is an accumulation of facts. This type of discrete item stresses knowledge of small units without putting them into any context.

We have to devise a curriculum that will teach together a foreign language and a foreign culture. Present syllabi may state noble goals, but present realization falls far short. The necessary revolution is to get pupils to think more intelligently about the relationships within a culture, and in this area to require of pupils as high a degree of intellectual performance as is required of them in other areas, such as mathematics and science.

The teachers themselves must get a better theoretical grasp of what they are doing; e.g., they must know that culture is a system and must understand the relationship between facts and their meaning.

The teaching of culture must be an ongoing activity. Culture taught in a compressed form at a certain part of the year (e.g., during spring review just before Regents examinations) does not make any sense.

In effecting the reorientation of teachers and pupils to a new understanding of "culture" in foreign language teaching and study, the State Education Department can make a good start without publishing a new syllabus. Instead, it should publish a memorandum which states in terms of pupil behavior what it will be necessary to do in order to succeed in handling the cultural aspects of the Regents examinations in modern foreign languages. The main vehicle for effecting the change will be the Regents examinations and supporting memoranda. New York State is very lucky to have the Regents examinations and through them can lead the Nation in effecting desirable changes in foreign language study.

Implementing the Theories

The most important objective is the development of the ability to relate a cultural item in one area to the fabric of the total culture.

The entire Regents examination in any and each modern foreign language could constitute a kind of culture question, at least through impregnation of every question with cultural considerations in varying degrees of focus. Still, there is justification for a special section devoted to testing culture as we have discussed it here.

This conference implied something for instruction and could well set the main direction of foreign language instruction for New York State in

the 1970's and beyond. Foreign language study should imply -- and perhaps should essentially be -- cultural study. However, we must be wary of trying to combine cultural teaching and language teaching as a simultaneous interweaving. There is a danger that shifting the weight of the Regents examination in favor of culture might destroy all, in view of the recent history of attempts to improve foreign language teaching in the U.S.A., by eliminating difficulties through a reduction in the amount of basic language to be learned. If it is the nature of cultural study, properly understood, to be as challenging as anything in the curriculum, we must be content to leave it so; culture must not consist of dancing around in the classroom or of other nonsense invented out of boredom with necessary basic work of all kinds, including drills which are genuinely productive of foreign language skills.

It is our job, through language study, to give the pupils a positive and pragmatic handle allowing them to have solid material which will provide an understanding of patterns of French (or other foreign) cultural behavior. There is no doubt that this behavior exhibits much regularity and that patterns are recognizable by the initiated. Our duty must be to initiate the pupils into an understanding of the patterns which characterize the culture under study.

In identifying cultural patterns and selecting items for study, care must be taken not to cater to pupils' individual tastes to the extent of becoming engrossed in trivialities. We have to consider appropriateness of cultural behavior on broader levels, with more meaningful implications: the intervention of government in business, industry, life in general; the basic options in the life of the individual and the collectivity in such terms as socialized medicine, social insurance, the relationship of local groups, and of the collectivity to the state.

If we want the pupils to understand that certain cultural patterns are at work in a particular culture, we must tell the teachers: "Here are a number of topics of interaction that we would like you to exploit, and we are going to devise questions on some of these. We shall identify cultural topics periodically for treatment in the Regents examination in each foreign language."

The following topical headings, listed below, with model test items, could be the basis for a specific cultural section in a given foreign language Regents examination. These topics could vary from year to year, in a combination to be determined for each language according to its needs and possibilities. To be sure, the topical headings themselves might at some time need to be supplemented, reduced, refined, or otherwise altered.

1. The ability to relate causally a cultural pattern to other patterns in such areas as society, the individual, and the ecology.

<u>Spanish</u>

Si en un país determinado de Latinoamerica el gobierno

prohibiera el ingreso de capital norteamericano para el desarrollo de la industria petrolera, la reacción más esperada entre el sector estudiantil sería

(1) tristeza por el porvenir económico
v(2) exaltación por motivos nacionalistas
(3) indiferencia completa
(4) protestación contra el gobierno

2. The ability to recognize appropriate reactions in a social situation calling for a conventional propriety or the resolution of a conflict, thus requiring the testee to indicate an awareness of the relative priorities of the target value system.

French

Un Français moyen entre dans un café. Un individu l'insulte. Quelle est sa réaction?

(1) Il appelle la police.
(2) Il lui met son poing sur la figure.
v(3) Il répond par une insulte.
(4) Il reçoit l'insulte tout tranquillement.

3. The ability to understand the cultural meanings associated with the pupil's range of linguistic fluency in the target culture (i.e., linguistic and extralinguistic cultural referents, kinesics, semiotics, etc.).

Italian

Gianni, uno scolare di undici anni, si è fermato nella piazza a chiacchierare con i compagni. Guardando verso la casa, vede la madre che gli fa un segno in questo modo: la madre estende la mano in avanti, con la palma in giù, al livello della testa, e poi col braccio esteso, abbassa la mano, facendo un arco dall'alto al basso fino al ginocchio. Il segno significa:

(1) Non fare tanto rumore!
(2) Non ti sporcare!
(3) Ti batterò.
v(4) Vieni qua!

(Note: This item could be accompanied by a sketch.)

4. The ability to recognize the ways in which language and culture interact in terms of the common variables of age, sex, social class, marital status, and residence.

Spanish

Pablo Morales Alvarez se casa con Amelia Rodríguez Moreno. Tienen un hijo y lo llaman Ricardo. El nombre completo del hijo será:

v(1) Ricardo Morales Rodríguez
(2) Ricardo Morales Moreno
(3) Ricardo Rodríguez Morales
(4) Ricardo Morales Alvarez

5. The ability to understand the meanings which the simple facts of the geography and history have for the people who are presently living in that culture.

German

Es wurde oft versucht, die deutsche Sprache von Fremdwörtern zu "reinigen", besonders zu Zeiten als

v(1) ein starkes Nationalgefühl herrschte
(2) Studenten nicht mehr fremde Sprachen lernen wollten
(3) das Volk die fremden Worte nicht verstehen konnte
(4) die Universitätsprofessoren einen starken Einfluß hatten

These items imply changes in pedagogical procedures. In addition to the topical facets already mentioned, two more should be brought strongly to the teachers' attention for possible use now and later:

1. The ability to evaluate the relative veracity of a statement concerning the target culture in terms of the standard of evidence substantiating such a statement.

2. The ability to describe a research procedure (or to cite the major sources) for developing a needed generalization.

In any case, for the solution of problems such as those used in the above models, the pupils will have to bring to bear an understanding of prevalent attitudes among various social groups regarding foreigners, economic development, police intervention, the relation between physical strength and intellectual prowess, and the use of gestures as an adjunct of language. Similarly, teachers would have to develop some acquaintance, particularly in reference to the language they teach, with semiotics as the science of signs and with kinesics as the science of body movements used in signalling meaning -- all within the framework of a particular system of systems constituting a culture. What these considerations mean in detail and with reference to each language and culture is a matter to be settled through discussion by well-informed equals. Suggestions for the manner of

discussion are made under that section of this document which is entitled "The Department View."

At Levels I and II, it may well be necessary to keep the language learning and cultural learning relatively separate, though the cultural learning at all levels must be authentic and meaningful. Then at Level III it will be possible to combine the reading more overtly with cultural materials (not only basic tests,[1] but also collateral readings in newspapers and magazines). The materials at Levels I and II may be selected so as to help supply the needs of Level III and fit naturally into a three-year lead-time of topics assigned for testing in a given Regents examination. The Bureau of Foreign Languages Education should delineate the problems to be studied in schools for the next 2-3 years, then move on to other problems. This would create a cultural curriculum. There should be no attempt to "cover" all aspects of a foreign culture at one time; when you cover ALL aspects of a culture, you cover NONE. Examples of single cultural topics to be assigned, each for study during a given academic year, are: the evolution of the French (or other) village; the impact on (France) of colonization-decolonization; the (Algerian) war and its impact on the (French) population. These topics may or may not excite the pupils. The point is that although pupils may not be forced to become devotees of literature, they should be obliged to develop intellectual interests. We cannot continue the old questions. Though much research needs to be done and material produced, enough is now available to permit quick implementation of the reoriented approach which we are suggesting. Let the Department, for example, identify 20 topics in a given book which will be the basic reference text and cite collateral readings in certain kinds of newspapers and magazines; select two or three topics as the focal point of study for a given year (allow a lead-time of 2-3 years); include topics that can be dealt with concretely through pictures and on any reasonable level of abstraction; announce and test groups of topics in turn.

No fact, whether historical, geographical, or whatever, should be taught apart from the context of contemporary French culture. Testing a pupil's "knowledge" of a discrete "fact" or cultural item, without testing his understanding of the relationship of that item with other items in the larger context, is meaningless and harmful.

The culture section need not be separated from the rest of the examination. If, for practical reasons, proficiency in language and proficiency in culture are to be tested in distinct parts of the examination, all items of the examination ought to be oriented with greater clarity than at present. However, a correct approach to the testing of cultural proficiency could be predicated on a general reorientation of the examination as a whole, in view of making it in its entirety a test of the pupil's

[1] In French, for example: Laurence Wylie, Village en Vaucluse, trans Armand Bégué (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1961), or Laurence Wylie, Les Français, collab. Armand Bégué and Louise Bégué (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1970).

grasp of the cultural patterns pertaining to the language studied.

In a transitional period involving the gradual overhaul of Part 4 or the revamping of the whole examination along cultural lines, factual questions could still be asked, but knowledge of nondiscursive items should be tested with the use of maps, pictures, etc., rather than through verbal guesswork.

Teaching and Testing

There may be a role for specific knowledge -- "simple facts" -- but in terms of culture those facts are best taught in some sort of meaningful pattern.

We must be sure to get rid of the "Tin is the principal product of Bolivia" type of question, but we should bear in mind that Bolivian tin is related to Bolivian social patterns.

First, the instructor may well teach some facts (Torino is in Northern Italy, the Rhein is a major river of Germany), but he must explain their significance in the life of the country. Learning historical facts may sometimes be essential, but the second and equally essential stage is to learn what those historical facts mean to present-day people living within that culture. There must be a dual approach which relates historical facts to the contemporary scene.

The teacher should deal with history only when it is embodied in current signs and representations referring, when necessary, from present to past, but not the other way around (i.e., not making a historical study from past to present). As a practical matter, it is not possible to deal properly with history and culture at the same time, and such an attempt typically results in utter confusion.

If the pupil learns dates, he should understand how they are organized in a continuum of history and what meaning they hold for a present-day member of the culture concerned. Historical facts are not important unless and until related to the general fabric of the contemporary culture.

Of course, as time goes on and the pupil gains proficiency both in the language and in the study of culture, he will learn to make his own identification of patterns. Indeed, the teacher should expect and even require pupils to identify cultural patterns in random readings -- that is, those in newspapers, magazines, and other sources not narrowly geared to "culture" -- and to marshal supporting evidence from their general study of culture as it is associated with study of the foreign language.

Literature and culture must not be intermixed in the Regents examinations. It is impossible to test literature through discrete or identification items.

To test understanding of the working of the foreign culture system, the number of items will be reduced from the present 15; one well-chosen item may suffice. There should be no "choices." It is possible to keep the present 10 percent value in the Regents examination, but to have a single complex far-reaching question deriving from one stem. This would, in effect, alter the present technique of testing culture. The important thing is to make sure that the pupils understand the relationships by forcing them to bring out into the open what the relationships are. You may use one or two passages which present plenty of possibilities.

Our goals can be achieved only if a certain kind of reading takes place. The reading must go deeper than the simple, denotative level which merely scratches the surface of communication. This reading must include newspapers and magazines. Further, the pupils' cultural backgrounds and their foreign language skills must be such that they can read cultural signs and understand connotations in cultural terms.

The use of pictures in presenting items might occasionally be helpful, especially in a transitional period or at early (say, the first two) instructional levels; e.g., showing people of different socioeconomic status in day-to-day interaction, or showing different types of houses. Maps could be used for geographical items, but they must be meaningful items, not reduced to mere "location" unrelated to the rest of the cultural fabric. Of course, the teachers must first show the pupils how to "read" culturally meaningful pictures. Then they must require the pupils to formulate in language what they read in those pictures.

Topics used in the examination should: 1. have inherent cultural significance of a high order; 2. "turn the kids on" in a mature way; 3. satisfy ego-needs (the desire for "involvement" and "relevance").

The examination should make it completely possible for the tester to see whether relationships have been correctly understood. This requirement may make it advisable to test in English at certain instructional levels (perhaps the first or the first two).

One techinque would be to make a short stem or background statement involving complex relationships; you would then be testing the cultural relationships provoked by the stem, and the solution would depend on the pupil's mastery of background knowledge and his skill in applying that knowledge to the comprehension of practical situations. Implicit statements would be involved in the stem; the pupil's job would be to elucidate the passage, to make everything explicit.

As soon as we deal with culture realistically and authentically, we can expect to bring out unpleasant facets which may shock people who want to teach (and learn) about a foreign culture in a "nice" way. We shall have to teach American pupils -- who may not be used to looking closely at their own culture -- to examine a foreign culture critically. Facing a foreign culture realistically may help them to face their own national realities.

Recapitulation

The present kind of "culture" question used in the Regents examinations in modern foreign languages should be replaced as soon as possible. "Culture" should be understood as a system of behavior, and cultural items should be considered only in relation to that system.

The goal of cultural study should be an understanding of how the members of a given culture function in that culture. It should not be to train Americans to function as natives in that culture or to develop empathy among Americans toward the members of the foreign culture.

Foreign language classroom activities for achievement of the goal of cultural understanding require new materials, knowledgeable teachers, and the development in the pupils of skill in reading cultural signs -- reading on the connotative level. The cultural aspects of foreign language study form an intellectual body which can be every bit as challenging as a parallel course in mathematics or science.

There may be a present shortage of suitable materials for appropriate cultural study in some languages at certain levels. It is nevertheless possible to plan and to start now for achievement of a goal which may be 3 years in the offing. Readings at early levels may be in English. At the third level, one or more standard texts may be recommended for statewide use. Newspapers and magazines can also be used to advantage.

Cultural items should be contemporary in nature, although historical developments with clear, current implications may be used. The items should also be nonliterary just as the study of culture should be nonliterary in a formal sense.

Assignments of topics for formulation of problems to appear in the Regents examinations could be made by the Department two or more years in advance. The assignments could refer to topics and chapters in terms of the proposed categories. These assignments would vary from year to year by languages.

There would necessarily be a transitional period from the present to the new approaches to testing cultural comprehension. It might be desirable to let cultural considerations permeate much or all of the examinations, just as they might permeate much or all of the instruction. At the same time, the teachers might well prefer to retain, at least for several years, a special section in the examination for the testing of culture.

The Department View

The Bureau of Foreign Languages Education identifies itself with the views toward culture which are stated above. It makes them known so that all will have the possibility of discussing them as well as of profiting from them.

This Bureau also identifies itself with the recommendations of the panelists. However, all the teachers of modern foreign languages have the duty to express their own opinions -- and the right to be heard -- on the weighty matter at issue. The revolutionary nature and scope of the matter cannot be ignored, for it involves at the very least the clarification of a body of knowledge which has long been imperfectly understood.

The views of the teachers may be made known individually through written communication to Mr. Paul Glaude, Chief, Bureau of Foreign Languages Education, New York State Education Department, Albany, New York 12224. The entire matter in its several parts may well form the subject of discussion and debate by all the major groups of modern foreign language teachers in the State: the New York State Federation of Foreign Language Teachers, the Association of Foreign Language Chairmen of New York City, the New York City Association of Foreign Language Teachers, the Foreign Language Association of Chairmen and Supervisors of Long Island, and the regional chapters of all the AAT's.

The Bureau of Foreign Languages Education will be pleased to send representatives to attend each major debate or discussion on the topic at hand. In addition, it will conduct informative sessions in collaboration with any or all of the organizations mentioned or with similar groups of teachers. However, it must be brought out that discussions by teachers of the same language will be indispensable at some point.

Plans for discussion should be made now. Progress toward achievement of the goal -- the reorientation of the teaching and study of culture, of an appropriate portion of the Regents examinations, and of the very nature of foreign language study -- should be made with all deliberate speed. Discussions between Bureau representatives and the organizations mentioned should occupy much of the fall of 1970. Perhaps a beginning can be made this spring.

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